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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 31 August - 6 September 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Clashes between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and GoS-backed militias against armed opposition groups decreased this week. Russian and Turkish armed forces conducted multiple military exercises in Idlib Governorate. HTS arrested a French foreign fighter in Idlib Governorate. COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northwest Syria.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Israel struck multiple targets in south and central Syria. Residents in Dara'a Governorate held protests calling on GoS to release its detainees. Attacks against GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters decreased this week. The Sayyida Zainab shrine in Damascus city was reopened despite an increase in COVID-19 cases.
- **NORTHEAST** | The Kurdistan Autonomous Administration re-opened two crossings with GoS-controlled territory. Israel attacked multiple pro-Iranian militia positions in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Operations against ISIS continued in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Attacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces by unidentified gunmen continued during the reporting period. COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northeast Syria.

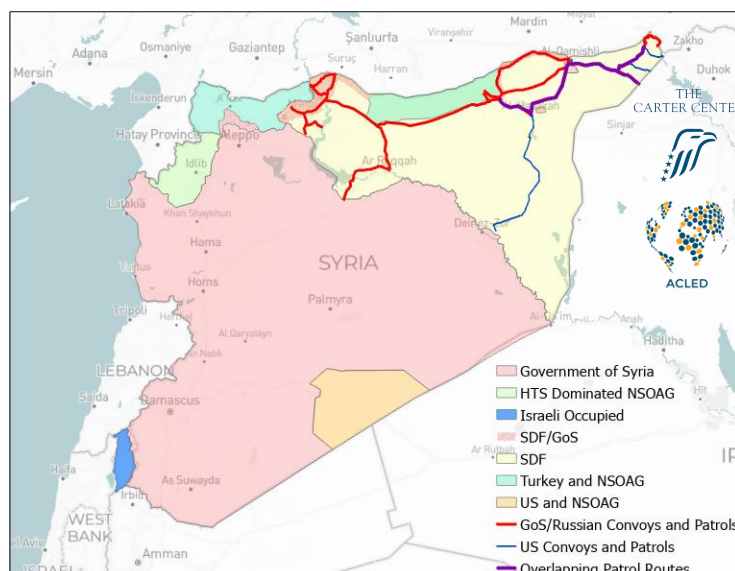
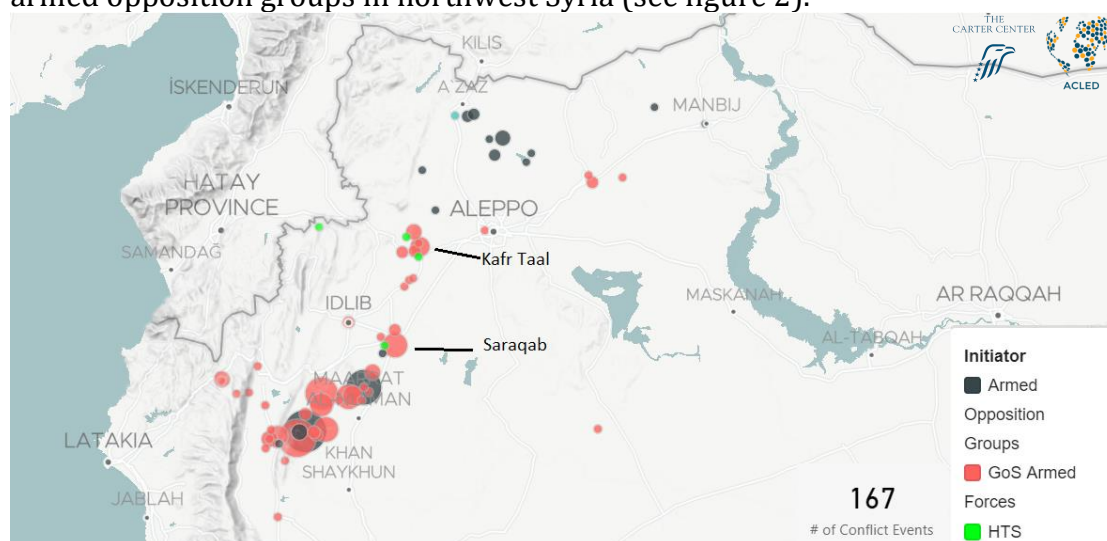


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 6 September 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1 on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Clashes between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and GoS-backed militias² against armed opposition groups decreased this week. On 31 August, Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) snipers killed 2 GoS soldiers near Turnabah, Idlib Governorate. On 1 September, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with HTS and armed opposition groups in Bara and Fleifel, Idlib Governorate. The next day, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with HTS and armed opposition groups in Taqad and Kafr Taal, Aleppo Governorates. The clashes were accompanied by an artillery exchange. On 4 September, HTS snipers killed an unspecified number of GoS soldiers near Jabal al-Zawiyah, Idlib Governorate. On 4 September, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with armed opposition groups near Kafr Taal, western Aleppo Governorate. The same day, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with armed opposition groups near the frontlines by Saraqab, Idlib Governorate. Turkish armed forces provided support to the armed opposition groups by shelling GoS armed forces positions in Saraqab. On 5 September, additional clashes were reported between GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias on the one side and HTS and other armed opposition groups on the other in Fleifel, Aleppo Governorate. Since the 5 March ceasefire, there have been 167 armed clashes between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups in northwest Syria (see figure 2).



¹ Figure 1, the Carter Center's areas of control map, depicts areas of the dominant actors' control and influence. While "control" is difficult to determine in a complex, dynamic conflict, territorial control is defined as an entity having power over use of force as well as civil/administrative functions in an area. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah maintain a presence in Syrian government-controlled territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish-dominated SDF and Turkish-backed opposition groups operate in areas not under GoS control. The area along the junction of the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the US-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Patrols are also depicted in the map to show the presence of actors that may have influence in an area. This is particularly relevant as US and Russian forces regularly have patrolled towns and routes in the northeast. While they do not control local administration or local forces, there is an assumption of a high degree of coordination with local de facto authorities. Data collected is by the publicly available project [ACLED](#).

² Pro-GoS or GoS-backed militias refer to armed groups that are funded or in some way supported by GoS and coordinate with or fight alongside GoS armed forces, but are not part of the state-run military.

Figure 2: Armed clashes between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups since 5 March 2020. Largest bubble represents 16 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Russian armed forces and Turkish armed forces conducted multiple joint military exercises in Idlib Governorate. On 31 August, Russian military police and Turkish armed forces held a joint military exercise focused on protecting the Russian-Turkish joint patrol in Turnabah, Idlib Governorate.³ On 1 September, Russia and Turkey conducted another joint military exercise focusing on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles. The goal of the exercise was to prepare both forces to use drones to clear the M4 highway.⁴ On 5 September, a second military exercise between Turkish and Russian armed forces was held in Idlib Governorate, focusing on drills around protecting the joint patrol.⁵ The Turkish-Russian joint patrol on the M4 highway in Idlib has remained a point of contention with armed opposition groups, resulting in occasional attacks on the patrol.

On 1 September, HTS arrested a French fighter who led the Ghuraba division, an armed opposition group made up of French foreign fighters, in Idlib Governorate.⁶ HTS defended the arrest, saying that the French fighter was setting up his own administrative apparatuses in Idlib.⁷ In recent months, HTS has been aggressive in arresting rivals and any other group or individual perceived as undermining its authority in northwest Syria.⁸

On 5 September, 14 new COVID-19 cases were reported in northwest Syria, the highest daily infection toll to date.⁹ As of 5 September, there were 112 COVID-19 cases in the northwest region.¹⁰ Medical staff continued to be hit hard by the virus, as many lack the necessary protective equipment and the GoS Health Ministry acknowledged the lack of capacity to do widespread testing.¹¹

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Residents in Dara'a Governorate held protests calling on the GoS to release detainees. On 31 August, residents in Sahwa town, Dara'a Governorate, held demonstrations calling for the release of a woman and child arrested by GoS. On 2 September, a riot broke out in Hrak, Dara'a Governorate, after GoS armed forces arrested an elderly man. During the riot, the Russian-backed 5th Corps took control of a GoS Air Force Intelligence checkpoint and arrested the intelligence officials.¹² On 3 and 4 September, demonstrators held a silent protest for the release of detainees in Dara'a city.

³ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-and-turkish-forces-carry-out-first-joint-military-exercise-in-syria/>

⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/413036>

⁵ <https://ria.ru/20200905/trenirovka-1576807649.html>

⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/412891>

⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/413024>

⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/413249>

⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/y4tp5rj3>

¹⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/22170>

¹¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-syria-hrw-medics-dying-virus-protection>

¹² <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/182438/>

On 31 August, Israel reportedly carried out 8 airstrikes across Dara'a and Rural Damascus Governorate. The Israeli airstrikes targeted Hezbollah, pro-Iranian militias,¹³ and GoS armed forces in Izra', Mahjeh, Namar, Qarfa, and Sheikh Misine in Dara'a Governorate. The Israeli airstrikes also targeted pro-Iranian militias and GoS armed forces the Damascus international airport and Kisweh in southern Rural Damascus Governorate. On 2 September, the Israeli air force attacked the T-4 airbase in eastern Homs Governorate. These were the first Israeli airstrikes in south and central Syria since June 2020. Since 1 January 2020, there have been 49 Israeli airstrikes in south and central Syria (see figure 3).

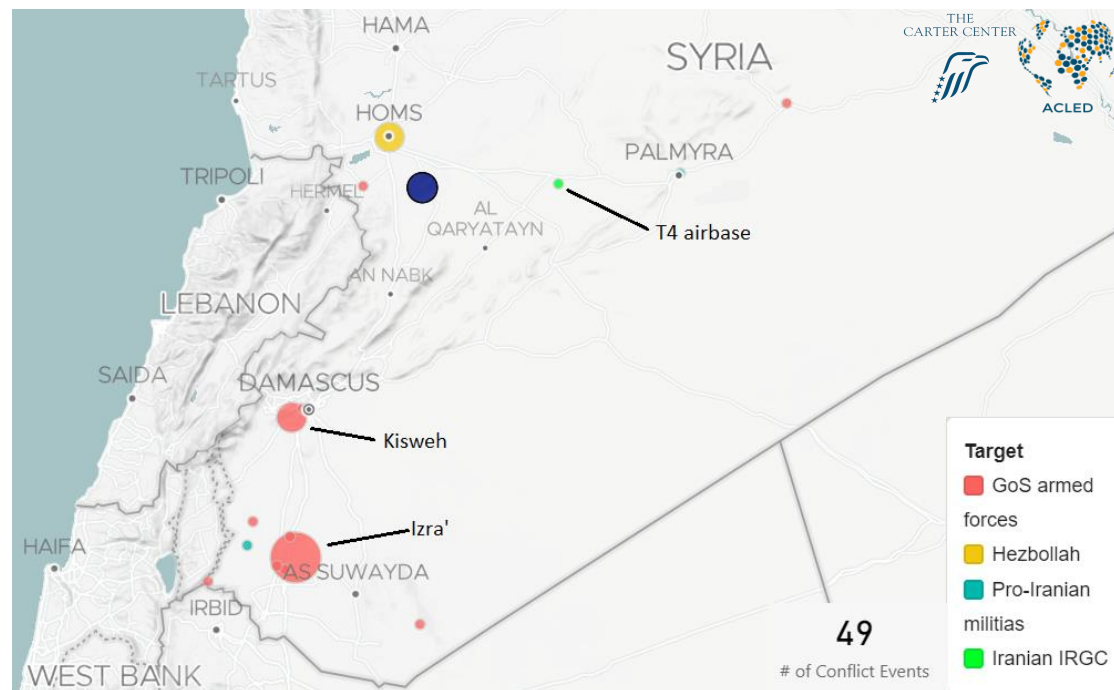


Figure 3: Israeli airstrikes in south and central Syria since 1 January 2020. Largest bubble represents 4 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Attacks against GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters decreased from the previous week. On 31 August, an unidentified armed group killed two GoS Military Intelligence officials after attacking a GoS checkpoint in Al-Qahtaniyah, Quneitra Governorate. The same day, the body of a GoS armed forces officer was found in Sakra, Homs Governorate, reportedly killed by an unidentified armed group. On 1 September, unidentified gunmen assassinated a commander of the Russian-backed 5th Corps in Hrak, eastern Dara'a Governorate.¹⁴ On 2 September, unidentified gunmen killed a GoS Military Intelligence officer in Nawa, Dara'a Governorate.¹⁵ Since GoS regained control of Dara'a Governorate, attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS soldiers and officials have been common, with most of the violence taking place in Dara'a Governorate.

¹³ Pro-Iranian or Iranian-backed militias refers to armed groups that are supported by Iran, like Hezbollah, and include militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

¹⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/412857>

¹⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/413086>

On 1 September, the Sayyida Zainab shrine near Damascus city was reopened with some new health measures.¹⁶ The holy Shia shrine was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of 6 September, there were 3171 reported COVID-19 cases and 134 deaths.¹⁷

NORTHEAST SYRIA

On 4 September, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration reported 15 new cases, bringing the total to 624 reported COVID-19 cases and 40 deaths.¹⁸ Despite the increasing number of COVID-19 cases, the KAA opened two crossings with GoS-controlled territory.¹⁹

Israel attacked multiple pro-Iranian militia positions in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 2 September, the Israeli air force attacked Kataib Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian militias in Qaalat al-Rahba, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The next day, the Israeli air force targeted pro-Iranian militias in al-Bukamal, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, reportedly killing 16 pro-Iranian fighters.²⁰ These were the first Israeli airstrikes in the northeast since 23 June.

Operations against ISIS continued in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 2 September, an ISIS-planted landmine killed an Iranian-backed Quds brigade fighter in the desert of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 3 September, Russian warplanes attacked ISIS positions at the al-Teem oil fields, eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 5 September, a joint operation by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, GoS-backed National Defense Forces, and GoS Military Intelligence arrested 5 fighters of an ISIS cell in al-Mayadin town, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. ISIS continues to remain active in the Badia desert region of central Syria.

Attacks against the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) by unidentified gunmen continued during the reporting period. On 31 August, an unidentified gunman killed a SDF fighter in Ar-Raqqa city, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On 2 September, an improvised explosive device (IED) planted by an unidentified armed group hit a SDF vehicle in Hala Khas, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. The next day, a SDF fighter was assassinated by unidentified gunmen in Basira, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 4 September, unidentified gunmen attacked a SDF vehicle in Gharibah, northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, killing one SDF fighter. The same day, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group exploded near a SDF base in Thiban, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The next day, another IED hit an SDF affiliated-Asayish vehicle in Thiban. On 5 September, unidentified gunmen and SDF fighters clashed in Basira, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Since 1 January, there have been 213 armed clashes involving SDF fighters in northeast Syria (see figure 4), with 120 of these attacks carried by unidentified gunmen.

¹⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/22079>

¹⁷ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=202367>

¹⁸ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/22143>

¹⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/y4tp5rj3>

²⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-israel-airstrikes-pro-iran-fighters-killed>

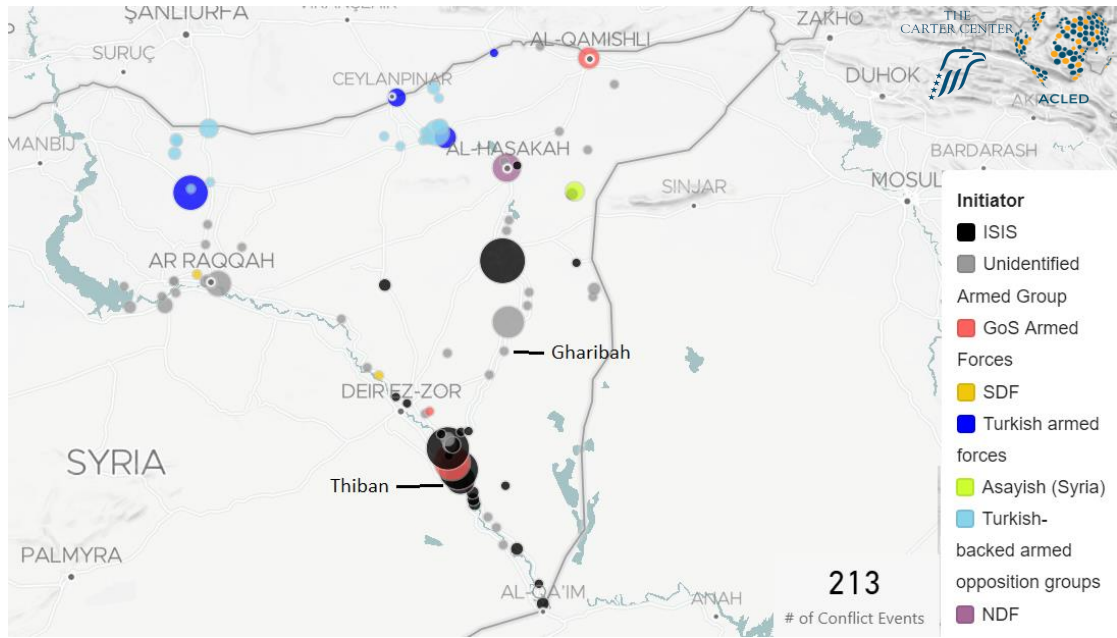


Figure 4: Armed clashes involving the SDF since 1 January 2020. Largest bubble represents 16 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

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